

# Transformative Narratives and Shifting Identities in the Narthex of the Boiana Church

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At some point before 1259 the Bulgarian aristocrat and high court official Kaloian together with his wife Desislava had the church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon at Boiana near Sofia refurbished and adorned with new frescoes (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The church reveals

several building phases, the earliest dated to the tenth and the latest to the nineteenth century; nine fresco layers have been discovered, two of which predate Kaloian's interventions, when the church was entirely overpainted.<sup>2</sup> The thirteenth-century program of the church is of great interest for two main reasons: it

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1 The literature on the church is quite voluminous. For historiographic essays on the literature pertaining to the Boiana church, see C. Brisby, "The Historiography of the Thirteenth-Century Wall Painting at Boiana: Another Case of Parallel Universes?", *BMGS* 19 (1995): 3–32; I. Duichev, "Boianskata tsurkva v nauchnata literatura," in *Bulgarskoto srednovekovie* (Sofia, 1972), 475–512. See also I. Akrafova-Zhandova, *Boianskata tsurkva* (Sofia, 1960); A. Grabar, *Boianskata tsurkva* (Sofia, 1924, repr. 1978); I. Gulubov, *Nadpisite kum Boianskite stenopisi* (Sofia, 1963); N. Mavrodinov, *L'église de Boïana* (Sofia, 1972); L. Mavrodinova, "Za dekorativnata sistema i ideino-smislovoto sudurzhanie na Boianskite stenopisi," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 16 (1983): 41–45; K. Miiatev, *Boianskite stenopisi* (Sofia, 1961); G. Stoikov, *Arhitekturni problemi na Boianskata tsurkva* (Sofia, 1965). On individual aspects of the church's architecture and decorative program, see, for example, I. Doseva, "Spoliite v Boianskata cherkva: stroitelnen material ili relikvi," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 40 (2007): 7–12; A. Grabar, "Un reflet du monde latin dans une peinture balkanique du 13e siècle," *Byzantion* 1 (1924): 231–36; N. Moran, "Byzantine Carpet Ideology," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 40 (2007): 13–15; B. Penkova, "Novootkrita freska 'Vvedenie Bogorodichno' v severniia arkosolii v pritvora na Boianskata

tsurkva," *Starobulgaristika* 4 (1994): 109–15; eadem, "Kum vuprosa za funktsiata na pritvora na Boianskata tsurkva ot gledna tochka na ikonografskata programa na stenopisite v nego," *Izkustvo* 33–34 (1996): 13–16; eadem, "Izobrazhenieto na Bozhiiata desnitsa v Boianskata tsurkva," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 31 (1998): 11–16; eadem, "Bogoroditsa s Mladenetsa ot Boianskata tsurkva (edna hipoteza)," in *Medunarodni naučni skup Osam vekova Hilandara: istorija, duhovni život, umetnost i arhitektura, oktobar 1998*, ed. V. Korać (Belgrade, 2000), 667–73; eadem, "Khristos Vsedurzhitel v kupola na Boianskata tsurkva," in *Pieti Dostoit: Sbornik v pамет na Stefan Kozhuharov*, ed. A. Miltenova et al. (Sofia, 2003), 552–62; eadem, "Kum ikonografiata na evangelistite v Boianskata tsurkva," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 36 (2003): 20–22; eadem, "Chudoto na Sv. Nikolai s kilima v Boianskata tsurkva," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 41 (2008): 6–10; L. Prashkov, "Stenopisite ot XIII v. v gornii etazh na Boianskata tsurkva," in *Bulgarsko srednovekovie: Bulgaro-suvetski sbornik v chest na 70-godishninata na prof. I. Duichev* (Sofia, 1980), 323–34; and all essays in *Problemi na izkustvoto* 28 (1995), which is entirely dedicated to different aspects of the Boiana church. Most recently Bulgarian scholars have been dealing with the identity of the Boiana artists: see K. Popkonstantinov, *Zograf Vasilie and the Boyana Church 750 Years Later* (Sofia, 2009); Z. Zhdrakov, "Za podpisite na Boianskiiia maistor Dimitur," *Starobulgaristika* 32 (2008): 47–68. I thank Asen Kirin for this latter reference.

2 L. Koinova-Arnaudova, "Istoriia na izpisvaneto i restavratskite namesi v Boianskata tsurkva," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 28 (1995): 42–50.

provides a rare opportunity to explore the interventions of the donor in designing it and, most importantly, it offers an insight into the visual discourse of an era when, as a result of the 1204 Crusader conquest, Latin-occupied Constantinople had ceased to be a major center of artistic production. This study endeavors to unravel the lengthy and sophisticated narratives in the narthex, and to reveal ways to better understand the function and role of that space. My purpose is to show how the biblical and hagiographic scenes, together with the images of saints and lay people, were woven into an elaborate network of associations, a metanarrative, intended to redefine the identities of the donors and of the average churchgoers.<sup>3</sup>

The portraits of the *ktetors* Kaloian and Desislava are painted on the north wall, while those of the ruling king Constantine Tich and his wife Irene are immediately across on the south wall (figs. 2a, 2b). The Presentation of the Virgin and the twelve-year-old Christ teaching in the Temple are given special prominence within the niches on the north and south wall respectively, while eighteen scenes from the life of St. Nicholas are frescoed on the vaulted ceiling. A full-length image of the patron saint, Nicholas, is represented on the northeast pier (fig. 3). An icon of Christ titled Chalkites is painted on the southeast pier of the entrance into the naos (figs. 3, 4), its position recalling the association of the icon with other doors, such as the entrance to the Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors or the west door of the naos of the Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia.<sup>4</sup> In the thirteenth century this icon had become a symbol of the ambitions of the Nicaean emperors to restore the Orthodox presence in Constantinople; the image of Christ Chalkites was prominently displayed on the obverse of Nicaean coins and may have been transferred to Bulgaria together with Irene, the Laskarid bride of Constantine Tich.<sup>5</sup>

3 My study is in no way comprehensive; it considers a limited number of individual saints and discusses the iconography and meaning of only a few key scenes from the life of St. Nicholas.

4 G. P. Majeska, "The Image of the Chalke Savior in Saint Sophia," *BSI* 32 (1971): 284–95; C. Mango, *The Brazen House: A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace in Constantinople* (Copenhagen, 1959), 149–69; for the placement of the icon over the Beautiful Doors of the church of the Forty Martyrs in Constantinople, see Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Ecclesiasticae historiae* 62, PG 147:413B.

5 M. F. Hendy, *Coinage and Money in the Byzantine Empire 1081–1261* (Washington, D.C., 1969), 238, 243, pls. 32.7, 33.9; idem, *DOC*



FIG. 1. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, view from northeast (photo: A. Kirin)

The analysis of the decorative program of the narthex of the Boiana church has been complicated by the presence of what appear to be two *arcosolia*, the result of a thirteenth-century expansion of the building. This architectural feature led some scholars to believe that the space was intended to accommodate the burials of the two donors, Kaloian and Desislava.<sup>6</sup> Others considered it simply a church vestibule with two niches meant to enliven the otherwise plain vaulted chamber of the narthex.<sup>7</sup> In view of the fact that no buried remains or

4.2: 491, 502, pls. 31, 33; Mango, *Brazen House*, 141.

6 A. Grabar, "Bolgarskie tserkvi-grobnitsy," *IzvArhInst* 1 (1921–22): 122–27.

7 Stoikov, *Arhitekturni problemi*, 116–22; B. Penkova, "Bolgarskie tserkvi-grobnitsy," in *Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo, Vizantiia i Drevniaia Rus': K 100-letiiu Andreia Nikolaevicha Grabara (1896–1990)*, ed. A. L. Batalov et al. (St. Petersburg, 1999), 146–48. It has been shown, in fact, that the *parekklesion* on the second floor, and not the narthex,

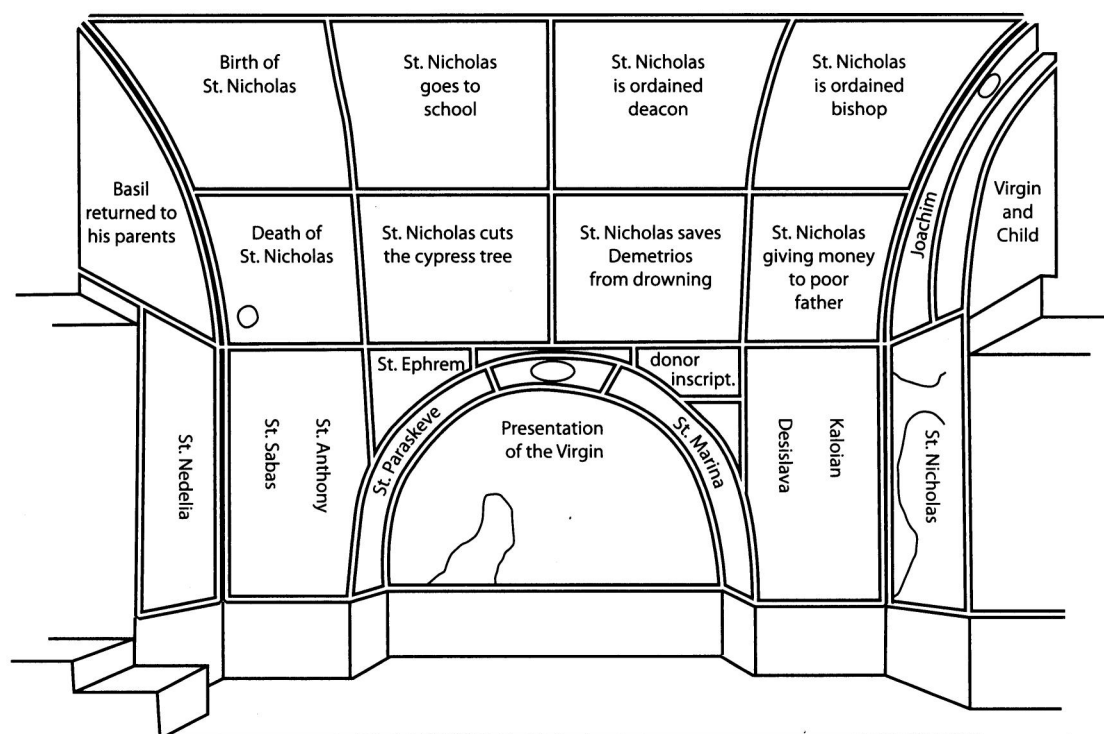


FIG. 2A. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, plan of the narthex with scenes in north half (after A. Grabar, *Boianskata tsurkva* [1924], fig. 7)

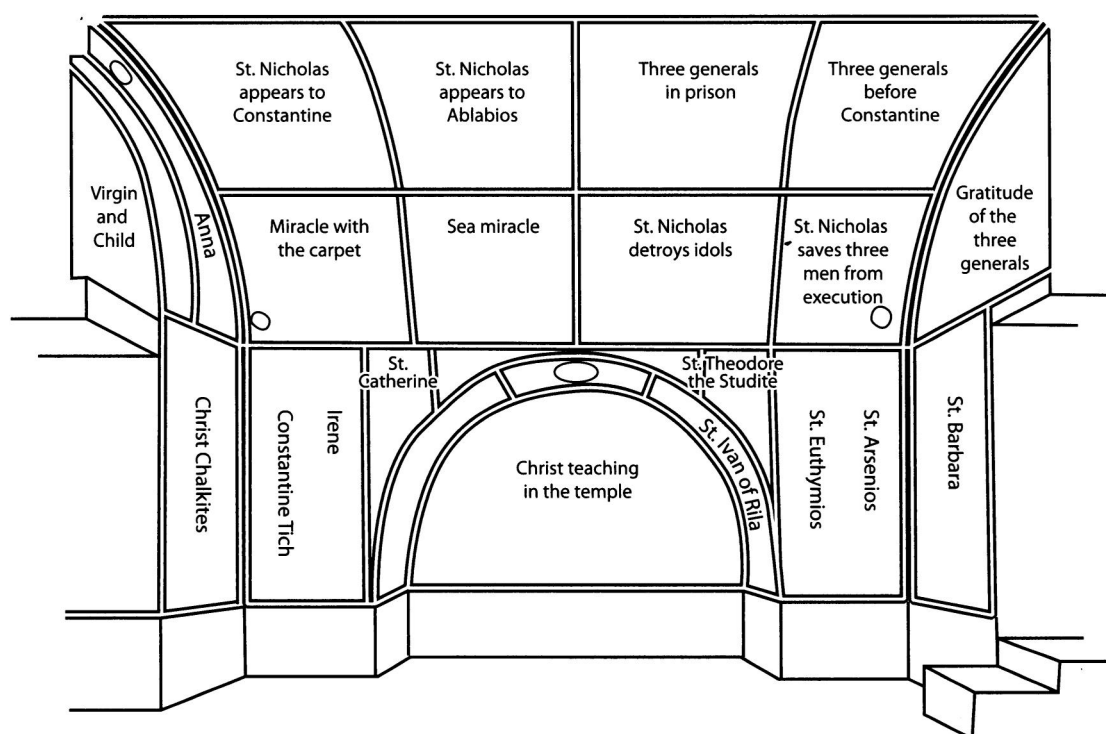


FIG. 2B. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, plan of the narthex with scenes in south half (after A. Grabar, *Boianskata tsurkva* [1924], fig. 7)





FIG. 3.  
Church of SS  
Nicholas and  
Panteleemon,  
narthex, looking  
east (photo:  
V. Tzvetkov)



FIG. 4. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon,  
narthex, southeast pier of east door, Christ Chalkites  
(photo: V. Tzvetkov)

evidence of any funerary furnishings have been found, it is much more likely that the narthex interior was intended to echo that of the earlier cruciform naos, creating a sense of continuity between the two otherwise chronologically disparate buildings (fig. 5).<sup>8</sup> Both the naos and the older part of the narthex were overpainted in the thirteenth century, further demonstrating the desire of the donor for compositional and thematic unity within the church.<sup>9</sup>

The fresco program of the Boiana narthex is as allusive as the *arcosolia* in providing clues about the precise function of the space. Some scholars have

had a funerary function and was used as a commemorative chapel. See B. Penkova, "Za pominalniia karakter na paraklisa na vtoriiia etazh na Boianskata tsurkva," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 28 (1995): 29–41.

<sup>8</sup> I thank Professor Sarah Brooks for discussing this aspect of the church's architecture with me.

<sup>9</sup> Grabar, *Boianskata tsurkva*, 28.



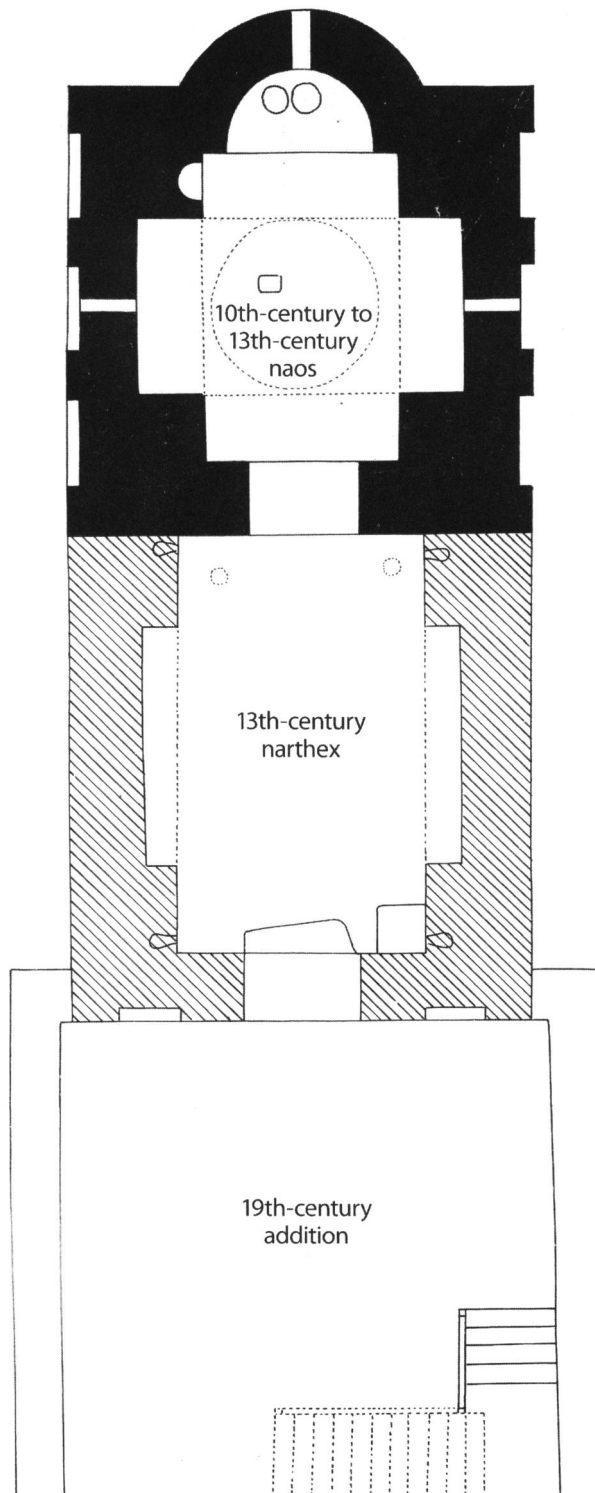


FIG. 5. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, ground plan with architectural additions (after A. Grabar, *Boianskata tsurkva* [1924])

identified the three images from the posthumous miracles of St. Nicholas—the miracle with the carpet, the return of the boy Basil to his parents, and the saving of Demetrios from drowning—and the monastic saints at Boiana as appropriate for a burial space.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as others have pointed out, there is nothing to suggest that these specific representations were intended to be perceived as funerary.<sup>11</sup>

In general the monumental programs of narthexes are extraordinarily diverse, as these spaces were multifunctional and frequently accommodated a number of orchestrated rituals as well as private meditations and prayers.<sup>12</sup> It is not unusual, for example, to encounter in the church narthex scenes with eucharistic connotations,

10 See, for example, Mavrodinova, “Za dekorativnata sistema,” 43; eadem, *Stennata zhivopis v Bulgaria do kraia na XIV vek* (Sofia, 1995), 47.

11 Penkova, “Kum vuprosa za funktsiata,” 15. For funerary programs see, for example, E. Bakalova, *The Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery* (Plovdiv, 2003); S. T. Brooks, “The History and Significance of Tomb Monuments at the Chora Monastery,” in *Restoring Byzantium: The Kariye Camii in Istanbul and the Byzantine Institute Restoration*, ed. H. A. Klein (New York, 2004), 23–31; D. Koutoula, “The Decoration of the Burial Chapel of the Founder in the Byzantine Monastery, Charity and the Quest for Posthumous Salvation: The Case of Koutsovendis and the Pammakaristos Chapels,” in *The Kindness of Strangers: Charity in the Pre-Modern Mediterranean*, ed. D. Stathakopoulos (London, 2007), 49–69; R. Ousterhout, “Temporal Structuring in the Chora Parekklesion,” *Gesta* 34 (1995): 63–76; N. Teteriatnikov, “Private Salvation Programs and Their Effect on Byzantine Church Decoration,” *Arte medievale* 7 (1993): 47–63.

12 For the function and decorative programs of the Byzantine church narthex, see, for example, F. Bache, “La fonction funéraire du narthex dans les églises byzantines du XIIe au XIVe siècle,” *Histoire de l’art* 7 (1989): 25–33; S. Ćurčić, “The Twin-domed Narthex in Palaeologan Architecture,” *ZRVI* 13 (1971): 333–44; L. Drewer, “Recent Approaches to Early Christian and Byzantine Iconography,” *Studies in Iconography* 17 (1996): 28; G. Gerov, “The Narthex as a Desert: The Symbolism of the Entrance Space in Orthodox Church Buildings,” in *Ritual and Art: Byzantine Essays for Christopher Walter*, ed. P. Armstrong (London, 2006), 144–59; E. Hatzitryphonos, *To περίστω στην υστεροβυζαντινή αρχιτεκτονική: Σχεδιασμός—λειτουργία* (Thessalonike, 2004), 67–90; G. Nicholl, “A Contribution to the Archaeological Interpretation of *Typika*: The Case of the Narthex,” in *Work and Worship at the Theotokos Evergetis*, ed. M. Mullett and A. Kirby, *BBTT* 6.2 (Belfast, 1997), 285–308; A. Papageorgiou, “The Narthex of the Churches of the Middle Byzantine Period in Cyprus,” in *Rayonnement grec: Hommages à Charles Delvoye*, ed. L. Hadermann-Misguich et al. (Brussels, 1982), 437–48; S. Tomeković, “Contribution à l’étude du programme du narthex des églises monastiques (XIe–première moitié du XIIIe s.),” *Byzantion* 58 (1988): 140–54.

which would also be appropriate to adorn the space of the church altar.<sup>13</sup> The ultimate purpose of the programs of Byzantine church narthexes was not so much to provide backdrops for a few specific rites, but to stimulate transformative experiences within the viewers before encountering the mysteries in the naos.

It is with this premise that I will approach the sophisticated pictorial ensemble of the Boiana vestibule. The study of its polyvalent discourses will reveal its potential to continuously reshape and reaffirm the identities of the donors and the royal couple as well as of the average churchgoers entering the building. Within the liminal space of the narthex the frescoes provided visual cues for transformative experiences as the churchgoers moved from outside to inside, from secular to sacred.

I will elaborate here on Bisserka Penkova's study on the function of the space by examining the storytelling mechanisms of the narthex's monumental ensemble.<sup>14</sup> I will suggest that its basic organizing principle should be sought in rhetorical compositions, and more specifically in the technique of comparison, or *synkrisis*.<sup>15</sup> My inquiry will help establish how different narratives participated in the formulation of particular forms of aristocratic legitimacy and of individualized idioms of power within the specific historical and political landscape of thirteenth-century Bulgaria. I will look at the ways in which, through visual cues, Kaloian was eagerly restating the legitimacy of the royal pair, for his own power and influence derived from and depended on the king.

### The Portraits of the Donors and the Royal Couple

The images of the donor Kaloian and of his wife Desislava are on the left, at the easternmost end of the north wall (fig. 6).<sup>16</sup> Kaloian is dressed in a sumptuous



FIG. 6. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleimon, narthex, north wall, Kaloian and Desislava (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

deep-blue garment adorned with golden vine-like motifs and wears a diadem. He offers a model of the refurbished church to the patron saint Nicholas on the east wall. Desislava stands next to Kaloian, turning to him in a posture of supplication, wearing similarly luxurious but scarlet-colored clothing decorated with pairs of lions enclosed in large medallions. Her appearance is complemented by a tightly fitting headdress elegantly strapped below her chin and a diadem studded with precious stones.

Tsar Constantine and his wife Irene are represented on the privileged, right side of the narthex, at the easternmost end of the south wall (fig. 7). Constantine is dressed in a Byzantine *loros*, wears a closed hemispherical crown, holds a scepter topped with a cross in his right hand and clutches an *akakia* in his left. Irene, next to Constantine, is clad in a red mantle and a gown decorated with medallions and pearls, which predominate on the king's costume as well. A crown with

13 On the cross-fertilization of narthex and apse programs, see S. Kalopissi-Verti, "The Proskynetaria of the Templon and Narthex: Form, Imagery, Spatial Connection and Reception," in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. S. E. J. Gerstel (Washington, D.C., 2006), 107–32.

14 Penkova, "Kum vuprosa za funktsiata" (n. 1 above).

15 On *synkrisis* in Byzantine art, see H. Maguire, "The Art of Comparing in Byzantium," *ArtB* 70 (1988): 88–103.

16 For the ktetoric composition, see T. Kambourova, "Ktitor: Le sens du don des panneaux votifs dans le monde byzantine," *Byzantion* 78 (2008): 273–76.



FIG. 7. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, narthex, south wall, Constantine Tich and Irene (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

pointed and slightly flaring extensions signals her royal status. Irene is depicted with her right hand extended toward the king and with a scepter in her left; she does not turn toward her husband but stands stiffly frontal, much like him.

The dedicatory inscription frescoed on the north wall of the narthex, right next to the portraits of the donors, reveals that Kaloian is of noble descent and that he is related to the Serbian royal family: he is identified as the grandson of King Stefan the First-Crowned and a cousin to the Bulgarian tsar Constantine.<sup>17</sup> It

17 The dedicatory inscription reads: "This immaculate temple of the sainted hierarch in Christ Nicholas and of the sainted and most honored martyr of Christ Panteleemon was built up from the ground and created with the diligence, good works and love of the sebastokrator Kaloian, the king's cousin and grandson of St. Stefan, the Serbian king. It was painted in the Bulgarian kingdom during the rule of the faithful, pious, and Christ-loving tsar Constantine Tich. Indiction 7 of the year 6767." Unless otherwise specified,

has proven close to impossible to further establish the donor's identity.<sup>18</sup> He seems to have been a newcomer on the political scene and was very likely from the southwest part of Bulgaria. Constantine must have bestowed on him the title *sebastokrator*, the highest honor in the Bulgarian court at that time, in return for his support in obtaining the throne.<sup>19</sup> Kaloian's wife Desislava, whose name suggests close ties with Serbian and southwest Bulgaria, must have come from that same region.<sup>20</sup> Besides the portrait in Boiana, no other sources exist that can help us further our knowledge of Desislava and her origins.

Like Kaloian, Constantine Tich was similarly unknown before he became king of Bulgaria in 1257. A nobleman of half-Serbian, half-Bulgarian origin, he assumed the name Asen only after he wed Irene, the granddaughter of Tsar Ivan II Asen (1218–1241) and daughter of the Nicaean emperor Theodore II Laskaris (1254–1258).<sup>21</sup> This marriage alliance allowed him to legitimize and strengthen his position on the throne, firmly associating him with the Bulgarian royal family. Irene's portrait right next to his was meant to affirm not only their union but also his legitimate tie with the broken line of the Asen dynasty. The only female saint on the south wall—the regal St. Catherine of Alexandria—is in immediate proximity to Irene (figs. 2b, 8). The facial features of the saint and of the living woman are very similar, recalling a common pairing of Catherine with

all translations in this article are my own. For the inscription see: Gulubov, *Nadpisite* (n. 1 above), 23–31.

18 I. Bozhilov, "Portretite v Boianskata tsurkva: legendi i facti," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 28 (1995): 7–9; I. Sotirov, "Kaloian II Alexandur Asen: Otnovo za atributsiata na grob N 39 v tsurkvata 'Sv. 40 muchenitsi' vuv Veliko Turnovo," *Godishnik na arheologicheskiia institut s muzei* 2 (2002): 327–46.

19 Bozhilov, "Portretite," 8. On the title *sebastokrator* in Bulgaria, see E. Savcheva, "The Office and Title of the *Sebastocrator* in Bulgaria," *EtBalk* 14 (1978): 70–74; eadem, "Particularités étatiques et juridiques du titre 'sebastocrator' en Bulgarie durant la période XIIIe–XIVe siècles," *EtBalk* 15 (1979): 53–71.

20 Bozhilov, "Portretite," 8.

21 For Constantine Tich, see I. Bekker and L. Schopen, *Nicephori Gregorae historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn, 1829–1855), 1:60; A. Failler and V. Laurent, *Georges Pachymères: Relations historiques* (Paris, 1984), 2:451; A. Heisenberg, *Georgii Acropolitae Opera* (Stuttgart, 1903, repr. 1978), 1:152. For a discussion of the sources, see I. Bozhilov, *Familiata na Asenevtsi (1186–1460): genealogiia i prosopografiia* (Sofia, 1985), 115–18; idem, "Portretite," 5–7; S. Pirivatrić, "Jedna pretpostavka o poreklu bugarskog tsara Konstantina Asena 'Tiha,'" *ZRVI* 46 (2009): 313–31. On Irene, see *PLP*, fasc. 3, 93–94, no. 5976.



Irene, the sainted iconophile wife of the emperor Leo IV (775–780), and strengthening the homonymous queen's royal identity and through it that of Constantine Tich.<sup>22</sup> Constantine's marriage validated his royal title, which is exactly how Nicaean court rhetoricians justified the legitimacy of the heirs to the throne, demonstrating how deeply steeped the thirteenth-century Bulgarian ruling elite was in the most current trends of political thought and imperial ideology.<sup>23</sup>

The intentional pairing of Irene and Catherine indicates that we could learn more about the two lay couples from their relationship to images in close proximity as well as from the changes made to the pre-thirteenth-century program. The remains of the twelfth-century fresco layer reveal that the locations of the monumental icons of Nicholas and Christ on the eastern piers of the entrance into the naos were switched in the thirteenth century, very likely in order to accommodate the peculiarities in the placement of the two sets of lay portraits.<sup>24</sup> Thus Christ Chalkites was painted over the earlier image of St. Nicholas on the south pier so that he could be in close proximity to the portrait of the Bulgarian king Constantine, who in this way received a place of honor next to his heavenly sovereign.

According to Byzantine courtly protocol, kings and their families were the only ones who could be associated directly with Christ; the rest of humanity required sainted mediators.<sup>25</sup> Given the numerous references to Constantinople within the program of the Boiana church, familiarity with this protocol on the part of the patron and the artists should be considered very



FIG. 8. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleimon, narthex, south wall, St. Catherine of Alexandria (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

likely.<sup>26</sup> But the portraits of the Bulgarian royal family do not simply happen to be on the right, privileged side of the narthex. They are there very likely because in the southeast corner of the naos of the Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia, the emperor had a specifically designed chamber, the *metatorion*, from which he would observe the liturgy.<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting that the south side of a

22 N. Ševčenko, "The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine," in *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557): Perspectives on Late Byzantine Art and Culture*, ed. S. T. Brooks (New York, 2006), 123. For the pairing of St. Catherine and St. Irene, see, for example, S. M. Pelekanidis, *Καλλιέργεια, δλης Θεσσαλίας ἄριστος ζωγράφος* (Athens, 1973), pl. 81; R. W. Schultz and S. H. Barnsley, *The Monastery of Saint Luke of Stiris, in Phocis, and the Dependent Monastery of Saint Nicolas in the Fields, near Skripou, in Boeotia* (London, 1901), pl. 37; Ch. Bakirtzis, ed., *Ἅγιος Νικόλαος Ὁρρανός: Οἱ τοιχογραφίες* (Thessalonike, 2003), 93.

23 D. Angelov, *Imperial Ideology and Political Thought in Byzantium, 1204–1330* (Cambridge, 2007), 124.

24 E. Bakalova, "Za konstantinopolskite modeli v Boianskata tsurkva," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 28 (1995): 19.

25 N. Ševčenko, "Close Encounters: Contact between Holy Figures and the Faithful as Represented in Byzantine Works of Art," in *Byzance et les images*, ed. A. Guillou and J. Durand (Paris, 1994), 264–77.

26 Elka Bakalova ("Za konstantinopolskite modeli") has identified several visual references to Constantinople in the twelfth- as well as thirteenth-century fresco layers. Among these are the images of Christ Evergetis in the naos and of Christ Chalkites in the narthex, the representations of church poets, and the "family portrait" of the Virgin and Child with her parents, Joachim and Anna, in the narthex over the entrance into the naos. Cf. Zhdrakov, "Za podpisite" (n. 1 above), 64–65 and the discussion of St. Nicholas's appearance to the emperor Constantine and the miracle with the carpet below.

27 R. J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church* (London, 1988), 223–26; G. P. Majeska, "The Emperor in His Church: Imperial Ritual in the

number of royally sponsored monuments in Armenia, Russia, and Serbia, all three in the Byzantine sphere of influence, was frequently reserved for the prince and his retinue, imitating the use of the same space in the quintessential Orthodox church—the Constantinopolitan Saint Sophia.<sup>28</sup> What is more important, the southeast portion not only of the naos but also of the narthex could, through its painted decoration, be designated as distinctly royal. In the churches at Gračanica and Dečani, for example, the vestibules' southeast corners display the genealogical tree of the ruling Nemanjid dynasty, demonstrably tying this part of the narthex to regal presence, however symbolic.<sup>29</sup>

In Boiana the conspicuous placement of Constantine Tich's portrait on the south wall next to one of the ultimate, imperial icons of Christ visualized the ambitions of the Bulgarian king for legitimacy, and revealed further familiarity not only with venerable Constantinopolitan visual models but also with court ceremonial and the liturgical practices associated with it. The appropriation of Byzantine ceremonial in the time of Constantine Tich is attested by the great *logothete* and historian George Akropolites, who wrote that during his diplomatic mission to the king's court in Turnovo, the Epiphany (January 6) was celebrated with special pomp.<sup>30</sup> As Ruth Macrides has pointed out, this must have been done in emulation of the prominence assigned to the feast at the Byzantine court.<sup>31</sup> The importance of the Epiphany in thirteenth-century Turnovo, much like the purposeful association between the portrait of Constantine Tich and the icon of Christ

Chalkites in Boiana, tied the Bulgarian king to venerable models of royal behavior and supported in this way his, and by extension Kaloian's, claims for legitimacy.

Further awareness of Byzantine, and more specifically Constantinopolitan, imperial visual conventions is demonstrated in Boiana by the conspicuous stylistic differences discernible between the portraits of the royal couple and those of the aristocratic donors. While the latter have been described as much more lifelike, as exhibiting movement, and even as showing the artists' interest in current western pictorial models, the former have been labeled as stiff and iconic.<sup>32</sup> In his study of the Boiana frescoes, Nikola Mavrodinov has pointed out that the reasons for the stylistic differences in the portrayal of the two couples should be sought in the conventions associated with the visualization of people of different social status, and I would like to expand on his point.<sup>33</sup> This stylistic difference should be explained by the fact that in Byzantium the ruler was frequently described as a stable and unmovable pillar of virtue.<sup>34</sup> This metaphor naturally led to a type of imperial portrait that Henry Maguire has identified as "diagrammatic and abstract," and as intended to demonstrate the special association of the emperor with archangels and thus with God.<sup>35</sup> The lack of volume and movement in the representations of Constantine Tich only contributed to his metaphorical closeness to Christ. In a sense, Constantine and Irene already belong to a different, heavenly realm while still on earth. We shall see below how the strategically positioned and purposefully chosen episodes from the life of Mary and Christ add to the notion of the special place of the donors and their royal relatives within the divine order.

## The Narratives of the Images in the Two Niches

The two scenes from the life of the Virgin and Christ—the Presentation of Mary (*Eisodos*) and the Twelve-Year-Old Christ Teaching in the Temple—invite viewers to

Church of St. Sophia," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. H. Maguire (Washington, D.C., 1997, repr. 2004), 6.

28 See, for example, C. Jolivet-Lévy, "Présence et figures du souverain à Sainte-Sophie de Constantinople et à l'église de la Sainte-Croix d'Aghtamar," in Maguire, *Byzantine Court Culture*, 231–46; N. N. Nikitenko, *Rus' i Vizantiia v monumetal'nom komplekse Sofii Kievskoi* (Kiev, 2004), 205–7; I. Sinkević, "The Royal Doors at Marko's Monastery," *BSCAbstr* 33 (2007): 33.

29 For these royal programs, see S. Ćurčić, "The Baptismal Font in Gračanica and Its Iconographic Setting," *Zbornik Narodnog Museja* 9–10 (1979): 313–23; Z. Gavrilović, "Kingship and Baptism in the Iconography of Dečani and Lesnovo," in *Studies in Byzantine and Serbian Medieval Art* (London, 2001), 139–40; eadem, "The Archbishop Danilo II and the Themes of Kingship and Baptism in Fourteenth-Century Serbian Painting," in *ibid.*, 173–74.

30 Heisenberg, *Georgii Akropolitae Opera*, 1:176.

31 R. Macrides, *George Akropolites, The History: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford, 2007), 372.

32 Grabar, "Un reflet du monde latin"; idem, *La peinture religieuse en Bulgarie* (Paris, 1928), 155–56, 171–74.

33 Mavrodinov, *L'église de Boiana* (n. 1 above), 33–34.

34 H. Maguire and E. D. Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton, 2006), 141–45.

35 H. Maguire, "Style and Ideology in Byzantine Imperial Art," *ArtB* 28 (1989): 221–28.

move in the direction of the naos, and contribute to the understanding of the narthex as a transitional space (figs. 9, 10). The episodes are about personal growth and development: on one side Mary is at the beginning of her public life, being prepared to become the Mother of God; on the other, the youthful Christ sets in motion his teaching and ministry, revealing that he is the Son of God.<sup>36</sup> The two scenes also convey a sense of gender symmetry that may reflect the use of the space by women and men. The images of two female saints, Marina and Paraskeve, in the north niche and the predominantly male figures on the south wall may be an indication of the gendered use of the space. This would have been in accord with the more common association of the left, or north, side of the church building with women both in medieval Byzantium and in present-day Orthodox churches.<sup>37</sup>

The images of the Presentation of Mary and of Christ among the Teachers are arranged as a thematic pair: on the north wall a female child is taken to the Temple in Jerusalem by her parents and is followed by a throng of young maidens, while on the south wall a male child sits in the same temple amid male figures and is similarly attended by his parents. In the case of the Virgin's Entry, Joachim is the one who presents the girl to the priest Zacharias, and in the image of the twelve-year-old Christ preaching in the Temple, Mary is given prominence as she stands before Joseph to address her Son. This thematic pairing utilizes the rhetorical form of *synkrisis* (comparison), a standard technique used not only in literary but also in visual compositions.<sup>38</sup> The unifying element of the two representations is the figure of the Virgin—in the Presentation she assumes a posture of supplication as she is fed bread by an angel, and in the representation of Christ in the Temple she

turns in a similar posture toward her Child. This posture is given a more nuanced interpretation through the peculiar, if not unique, designation inscribed above Mary's figure in the Presentation: she is identified as "the Lord's servant," echoing her reply to the Archangel Gabriel in the Annunciation (Luke 1:38).<sup>39</sup> This invocation is especially important because, as will become clear below, it is the Virgin's humility and subservience that were emphasized in her encounter with the twelve-year-old Christ.

In its general outline, Mary's *Eisodos* at Boiana follows the established Byzantine iconography: Mary leads a procession that consists of her parents and the Jewish maidens carrying lit torches (fig. 9).<sup>40</sup> The figure of the priest Zacharias ready to greet the young child and the ciborium, which commonly stands for the Temple, are almost completely defaced. The Virgin is being fed by an angel to the right, but the iconography is unusual, with the angel officiating behind what appears to be an altar table and the Virgin standing on one side with hands outstretched to take the bread, echoing the image of Mary in the teaching scene on the south wall (fig. 10). The composition is imbued with eucharistic, and thus transformational, significance, offering a striking visual abbreviation of the Communion of the Apostles: the angel takes Christ's place and the Virgin replaces the file of apostles lining up to receive the bread.<sup>41</sup> Mary here is ready to accept the bread into her hands, mirroring the ritual of administering communion to the clergy, who similarly took the body of Christ directly into their hands.<sup>42</sup> This realistic touch adds a sense of immediacy

36 For a similar juxtaposition of the two scenes in the thirteenth-century church of Agios Sozon in Geraki, see N. K. Moutsopoulos and G. Demetrokallēs, *Γεράκι: Οἱ ἐκκλησίες τοῦ οἰκισμοῦ* (Thessalonike, 1981), 186, figs. 301–5, color pls. 83–84. For a discussion of the pairing of the two scenes, see C. Hennessy, *Images of Children in Byzantium* (Farnham and Burlington, 2008), 194.

37 S. E. J. Gerstel, "Painted Sources for Female Piety in Medieval Byzantium," *DOP* 52 (1998): 92–93; R. Taft, "Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When and Why?" *DOP* 52 (1998): 55, 70. For gendered interpretation of images of Mary's Presentation, see H. Maguire, "*Abaton* and *Oikonomia*: St. Neophytos and the Presentation of the Virgin," in *Medieval Cyprus: Studies in Art, Architecture and History in Memory of Doula Mouriki*, ed. N. Ševčenko and C. Moss (Princeton, 1999), 95–105.

38 Maguire, "Art of Comparing."

39 S. Smiadovski, "V Boianskata tsurkva 30 godini sled Prof. Ivan Gulubov," *Problemi na izkustvoto* 28 (1995): 54. Cf. Penkova, "Novootkrita freska" (n. 1 above), 113 for iconographic comparisons of the Boiana feeding episode with the Annunciation. I should note that in the later overpainting of the feeding of Mary in the Holy of Holies the angel was identified with an inscription as Gabriel, further suggesting possible associations of the episode with the Annunciation. For the importance of humility in initiation rites, see V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York, 1969, repr. 1997), 105.

40 For the iconography of Mary's Presentation, see J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge dans l'empire byzantin et en occident* (Brussels, 1964), 1:136–67.

41 On the Communion of the Apostles, see S. E. J. Gerstel, *Beholding the Sacred Mysteries: Programs of the Byzantine Sanctuary* (Seattle and London, 1999), 48–67.

42 Ibid., 56–57. A liturgical spoon was used to administer the communion to the laity. See *ibid.*, 56.





FIG. 9. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, narthex, north wall, Presentation of the Virgin (photo: V. Tzvetkov)



FIG. 10. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, Narthex, south wall, Twelve-Year-Old Christ Teaching in the Temple (photo: A. Kirin)

and relevance to the episode, reflecting a contemporary trend of accurately visualizing moments of the Eucharist as a way of asserting the righteousness of the Orthodox ways of celebrating the liturgy.<sup>43</sup> By accepting the bread, Mary is here transformed into *Theotokos* or Godbearer. The conspicuous display of liturgical implements on the table—a chalice and two patens are visible—complements the notion of the Virgin as a material container of God. The cherubs that hover above the two figures in the Boiana Presentation contribute to the idea of Mary's transformation into *Theotokos*: they not only recall the divine presence in the Holy of Holies, but also allude to a common designation of the Virgin as the new Ark of the Covenant—another container—which was frequently invoked in the hymns sung at the feast of the Presentation (November 21).<sup>44</sup>

The explicit eucharistic tone of the episode of Mary being fed by an angel in the Holy of Holies draws attention to the fact that the space of the narthex, just as that of the church altar, accommodated profound transformations.<sup>45</sup> By entering the church the participant in the services held at Boiana imitated the Virgin crossing the threshold of the Temple; the actual communion that took place before the church altar is anticipated by the representation of Mary accepting bread from the angel. In general, the idea of becoming prepared and worthy of higher realities was frequently dwelled upon in the exegesis of the Presentation.<sup>46</sup> For example, at the end of a homily on Mary's *Eisodos*, the fourteenth-century bishop of Thessalonike Gregory

Palamas invited his audience to imitate the Virgin by leaving aside the concerns of the flesh and transporting themselves from earth to heaven.<sup>47</sup> As an image of initiation Mary's Presentation is very appropriate for a transitional space such as the narthex and the physical and spiritual preparations that took place therein.<sup>48</sup>

The eucharistic character of the Presentation is intensified when the figure of Mary is interpreted as the gift offered by her parents to the Old Testament priest Zacharias.<sup>49</sup> In a more literal sense Joachim's and Anna's actions are mirrored by the donors Kaloian and Desislava, who present a model of the church to a priest, St. Nicholas. In this manner the two compositions become metaphorical extensions of each other. Similar association was made in the late twelfth-century decoration of the Virgin's church at Lagoudera on Cyprus, where the donor inscription is placed immediately below the image of Mary's Entry into the Temple, the juxtaposition intentionally aligning two temporally disparate events—the Presentation of Mary and the dedication of the church building to the patron saint (fig. 11). The same theme occurs also in the fourteenth-centuryesonarthex mosaics of the Chora church in Constantinople, where Theodore Metochites offers a model of the refurbished church to Christ immediately below an image of Mary's Presentation.<sup>50</sup> In Boiana the

43 Ibid., 51–52.

44 "Presentation of the Virgin," *ODB* 3:1715.

45 For the eucharistic character of the Presentation in Boiana, see Penkova, "Novootkrita freska," 112–13. The Presentation of the Virgin could be placed in the sanctuary, as in the early twelfth-century church of the Panagia Phorbiotissa on Cyprus (A. Stylianou and J. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus* [London, 1985], 119) or in the thirteenth-century decoration of the prothesis of St. Nicholas tes Rodias in Arta (B. N. Papadopoulou, *Η Βυζαντινή Άρτα και τα μνημεία της* [Athens, 2002], 66–68). On the eucharistic character of the scene, see A. W. Carr, "Images in Place: Themes of the Bema at Asinou" (paper presented at the Fourth International Congress for Cypriot Studies, Nicosia, 2008); A. Nicolaïdès, "L'église de la Panagia Arakiotissa à Lagoudéra, Chypre: Étude iconographique des fresques de 1192," *DOP* 50 (1996): 62–63. I am grateful to Professor Carr for sharing the text of her paper with me prior to its publication.

46 M. Evangelatou, "Pursuing Salvation through a Body of Parchment: Books and Their Significance in the Illustrated Homilies of Iakobos of Kokkinobaphos," *MedSt* 68 (2006): 253 and n. 48.

47 P. K. Chrestou, *Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά: Άπαντα τὰ έργα* (Thessaloniki, 1986), 11:52.15–16.

48 In Byzantine monuments the Presentation of Mary appears, as at Boiana, in liminal spaces such as narthexes or doors, as in the twelfth-century church at Daphne or at the 1192 church at Lagoudera on Cyprus. See, Maguire, "Abaton and Oikonomia" (n. 37 above). The preparatory character of the Presentation scene in Boiana is enhanced by a recently discovered inscription—the signature of the painter Dimitur—on the hem of Mary's *maphorion* right over her extended arm (Zhdakov, "Za podpisite" [n. 1 above], 62). Zarko Zhdakov relates this written "supplication" to other inscriptions on the Virgin's garment that derive from Psalm 44. This psalm is pronounced during the *prothesis* rite of the Orthodox liturgy, when the priest dedicates a piece of the offered bread to the Virgin. Dimitur's signature invoked the more common inscription from Psalm 44 subtly associating the image with the preparation for the Eucharist.

49 On the associations of Mary's Presentation with gift-giving, see A. Papanastasiou, "Gifts of Passage: Ritual and Representation in Middle Byzantine Cypriot Churches," in *Πρακτικά του Τρίτου Διεθνούς Κυπριολογικού Συνεδρίου*, vol. 2, *Μεσαιωνικό τμήμα*, ed. A. Papageorgiou (Nicosia, 2001), 493–501. Cf. Penkova, "Novootkrita freska" (n. 1 above), 112.

50 P. Underwood, ed., *Kariye Djami*, 4 vols. (New York, 1966), 2:211–15.



unusual yet deliberate placement of the donor inscription on the north wall, squeezed between the niche and the portraits of Desislava and Kaloian, provides the link between the Presentation scene and the pious gift of the donors, so that they can be perceived as a natural continuation of each other.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike Mary's Presentation, the image of Christ disputing with the Jewish doctors is much less discussed in scholarly literature, partially because the scene occurs rarely in Byzantine monumental art (fig. 10). In Boiana the Child dominates the composition seated under a ciborium on a *synthronon*-like structure. His striking, slightly twisted figure is additionally highlighted through its luminous clothing, which sharply distinguishes him from the other participants in the scene. He turns to address his mother, who approaches together with Joseph on the left. A lengthy inscription inserted between Mary and Christ relates the verbal exchange between the two (Luke 2:46–49). The Jewish teachers are represented on the right, forming an animated group of richly attired old and young men.

As pointed out above, at Boiana the episode of the young Christ in the Temple should be understood as dialogically interconnected with Mary's Presentation through the rhetorical principle of *synkrisis*. The two scenes are formally unified through the prayerful figure of the Virgin and through the ways in which they are singled out within the two niches. They are also thematically connected as they convey the spiritual growth of children and relate their separation from their parents. Furthermore, like Mary's Presentation, the Byzantines understood the teaching episode in eucharistic terms—in texts, through the interpretation of the presence of the Child in the Temple for three days as anticipating his salvific death and resurrection, and in images, through the occasional placement of the episode in close proximity to the altar, as in the thirteenth-century fresco program of the *diakonikon* of the church of Kato Panagia in Arta.<sup>52</sup>

51 On the more common placement of donor inscriptions above an entrance or in the apse in thirteenth-century churches, see S. Kalopissi-Verti, *Dedicatory Inscriptions and Donor Portraits in Thirteenth-Century Churches of Greece* (Vienna, 1992), 24. Frequently donor inscriptions are not placed next to the donor portraits, as can be seen in several thirteenth-century churches in Greece; see *ibid.*, 54, 71–75, 78, 81, 98–99, 100–101.

52 R. Laurentin, *Jésus au temple: Mystère de Paques et foi de Marie en Luc 2, 48–50* (Paris, 1966), 169–70, 208. In the Virgin

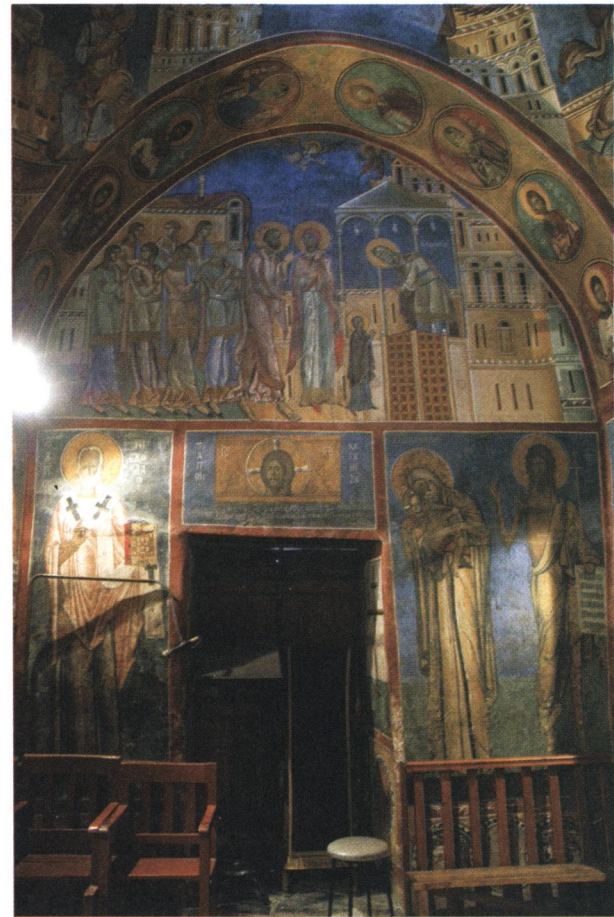


FIG. 11. Church of Panagia tou Arakou, naos, north wall, Presentation of the Virgin. Lagoudera, Cyprus (photo: A. W. Carr)

Moreover, like Mary's Presentation, the episode of Christ teaching at the Temple is a scene of initiation. In the thirteenth-century church of the Holy Trinity at Sopočani, for example, the image of the Child among the Jewish doctors is given unprecedented prominence on the south wall, and is similarly associated with a Presentation, in this case of Christ, placed right above it.<sup>53</sup> The spatial association at Sopočani of the moment of the purification of Mary and of Christ revealing his

church at Arta the image of the young Christ Teaching in the Temple shares the space of the *diakonikon* with a representation of the priest Zacharias rejecting the offerings of Joachim and Anna (Papadopoulou, *Βυζαντινή Αρτα*, 99–100, fig. 116). The pairing here resembles, to a degree, the dialogue between the two narrative scenes in the Boiana narthex.

53 V. Djurić, *Sopočani* (Belgrade, 1963), 130.





FIG. 12. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, narthex, lunette over west door, Nicholas Returning Basil to His Parents (photo: A. Kirin)

wisdom very much resembles the comparison at Boiana of the preparation of the Virgin's body for the mystery of the Incarnation and of the spiritual growth demonstrated by the young Child.

The representation of Christ among the Jewish wise men in Boiana may have prompted meditations on his relationship with his mother. The long inscription freely paraphrases the content of Luke 2:46–49, where Mary relates to her Son the worries she and Joseph had when they realized that he had remained behind in Jerusalem.<sup>54</sup> The theme of relationships between parents and children is amplified in Boiana by incorporating and strategically placing the pertinent messages within the program of images. The story of St. Nicholas returning the boy Basil to his parents after he had been taken by Arabs, for example, reiterates the idea of sepa-

rating and reuniting parents and children (fig. 12). This particular episode from the life of the saint was assigned special prominence by means of its placement above the west door. The frescoed icon of the Virgin and Child represented in the lunette over the door that leads into the naos, with Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, in supplication on both sides, echoes the message of the composition with the child Basil and prompts the viewer to ponder familial relationships (fig. 3).<sup>55</sup> It is conceivable that besides being meditations on the relationship between parents and children, these images were also implicated in the larger scheme of familial ties with the Bulgarian and Serbian royal houses that

54 For the inscription, see Gulubov, *Nadpisite* (n. 1 above), 37–38.

55 E. Bakalova, "Hymnography and Iconography: Images of Hymnographers in the Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Church Paintings in Bulgaria," in Armstrong, *Ritual and Art* (n. 12 above), 271.

Kaloian advertised in the donor inscription. These would have been especially important in the thirteenth-century aristocratic ethos, when noble descent legitimized one's ability to rule.<sup>56</sup>

But it is the theme of separation, a theme indicative of an initiation rite, that is really intimated in this teaching scene.<sup>57</sup> The text incorporated in the scene and the specific iconography chosen for the image of Christ corroborate such an interpretation and define him as an ambiguous, liminal character: while Mary addresses him as her human child (ч[адо]), he is represented as a young god. Christ appears to belong already to a realm different from that of his earthly ancestors: his figure is placed slightly off center with his body almost entirely turned toward the Jewish teachers. What Mary encounters, therefore, is not a human but a divine being, as is suggested by the brilliant color of the Child's apparel with imitations of chrysography around his neck and shoulders. Similar color effects are seen in representations of his divine manifestations painted in the naos: the Transfiguration, the Anastasis, and the Ascension (fig. 13). The feeling of separation of mother and child, of earthly parents and a divine offspring, is reinforced by the inclusion of the earliest known portrait of the first Bulgarian monk, St. Ivan of Rila, in the arch of the niche (fig. 2b).<sup>58</sup> Much like the written exchange between Mary and Christ, the inscription on St. Ivan's scroll emphasizes sorrow and abandonment, this time of earthly cares.<sup>59</sup>

The Virgin assumes a posture which visually intensifies the idea of separation indicated in the inscribed texts. With her hand pointing in the direction of Christ and with her eyes mournfully downcast, Mary's figure here anticipates her stance at the Crucifixion.<sup>60</sup> The only difference is that she does not look toward her child as she does in the Crucifixion painted in the Boiana naos (fig. 14). Instead, her head



FIG. 13. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleimon, naos, north wall, Anastasis (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

is bent down, very likely in early recognition of and respect for his divine mission.<sup>61</sup> This interpretation is supported by the portrait of St. Theodore the Studite painted on the south wall in immediate proximity to the niche (fig. 2b).<sup>62</sup> The text on his scroll reproduces the beginning of a *troparion* from the *Oktoechos* read during Sunday matins and contains references to Mary's role in the Incarnation and to the honor bestowed upon her divine son, echoing the messages of the narrative composition in the niche.<sup>63</sup>

But Mary's *Eisodos* and the teaching scene do not simply inform each other's meaning; they also relate to the portraits of the two lay couples. If the Presentation allowed Kaloian to incorporate himself into a complex network of gift-giving, then the teaching scene should be associated with the image of the king. But in what way? As Elka Bakalova has pointed out, "it is hardly coincidental that . . . the image pertaining to Christ (i.e., the teaching episode) was represented

56 Angelov, *Imperial Ideology* (n. 23 above), 106; A. P. Kazhdan and A. W. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley, 1985, repr. 1990), 102–4.

57 A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (Chicago, 1960), 74–75.

58 Grabar, *Boianskata tsurkva* (n. 1 above), 73, figs. 7, LIV.

59 Gulubov (*Nadpisite* [n. 1 above], 64) assigned a later fourteenth-century date to the inscription on the scroll of St. Ivan of Rila, but more recently S. Smiadovski ("V Boianskata tsurkva" [n. 39 above], 54) contested his opinion and implied that the inscription could, in fact, be dated to the thirteenth century.

60 Cf. Penkova, "Novootkrita freska" (n. 1 above), 113.

61 Luke 2:51; Laurentin, *Jésus au temple*, 174–86.

62 Grabar, *Boianskata tsurkva*, 74, figs. 7, LI.

63 Bakalova, "Hymnography and Iconography," 269–71, 272.





FIG. 14. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, naos, east wall, Crucifixion (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

on the same wall as the royal couple.”<sup>64</sup> I contend that not only the placement but also the iconography of the scene is important here, for it deviates from the more common Byzantine type, where the Child sits amid symmetrically arranged Jewish teachers while Mary and Joseph approach from one side. In fact, in contrast to Boiana, the two thirteenth-century treatments of the subject in Arta and Sopočani mentioned above follow this well-established iconographic model, which emphasizes the role of Christ as a teacher and as the incarnation of God’s wisdom (fig. 15).<sup>65</sup> This notion is especially apparent at Sopočani, where the scene’s architectural backdrop of seven columns unambiguously recalls the house of Wisdom described in Solomon’s Proverbs (9:1).

64 Eadem, “Za konstantinopolskite modeli” (n. 24 above), 20.

65 For interpretation of this iconography, see L. Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, 1999), 85–86.

The Boiana arrangement of the figures resembles renderings of the same episode in several late twelfth- and thirteenth-century manuscripts such as a Gospel Book from Cilician Armenia (Walters Art Museum 539, fol. 213v) and the Crusader “Acre triptych” at St. Catherine’s monastery on Mt. Sinai, where the Child is similarly juxtaposed with the Jewish teachers while his parents approach on the opposite side (fig. 16).<sup>66</sup> One is struck by the conspicuous lack of symmetry in these visualizations of the episode, with the Hebrews all gathered on one side of the image, and ganged up against the young boy.

Although the origins of this type of iconography remain obscure, we should perhaps assume that, given its dissemination in regions associated with Crusader presence,<sup>67</sup> it was transferred to Bulgaria through contacts with Crusader art.<sup>68</sup> The subject matter, with its heightened sense of conflict exhibited in the grouping of the Pharisees on one side, would have been especially meaningful in zones of religious confrontation such as the Near East where the Crusaders and the Cilician Armenians felt the pressure of Islam and of Byzantine Orthodoxy. Indeed, as Ioanna Rapti has shown, it is with this meaning that the scene was utilized in the above-mentioned Armenian *Tetraevangelion* from the Walters Museum (W 539).<sup>69</sup>

It is conceivable that in Boiana the iconography for the teaching scene was intentionally selected for its polemic character. To this end the portrait of St. Catherine on the south wall is of special significance (figs. 2b, 8). Her isolation from the female saints on the west and north walls, and her distinct pairing with the donor inscription across from her image, signal that her representation binds the teaching scene with

66 S. Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery* (Baltimore, 1973), fig. 115; H. Evans, ed., *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)* (New York, 2005), 357–59; J. Folda, *Crusader Art in the Holy Land from the Third Crusade to the Fall of Acre, 1187–1291* (Cambridge, 2005), 310–11; K. Weitzmann, “Thirteenth Century Crusader Icons on Mount Sinai,” *ArtB* 45 (1963): 186–89, esp. 188.

67 Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts*, 23–24.

68 For other Crusader “influences” at Boiana, see, for example, Brisby, “Historiography,” 20–21; Grabar, “Un reflet du monde latin” (both n. 1 above); N. Ševčenko, *Life of Saint Nicholas in Byzantine Art* (Turin, 1983), 133.

69 I. Rapti, “Gloses prophétiques sur l’évangile: À propos de quelques manuscrits arméniens enluminés en Cilicie dans les années 1260,” *DOP* 58 (2004): 137–38.





FIG. 15. Church of the Virgin at Sopočani, Naos, south wall, Twelve-Year-Old Christ Teaching in the Temple (reproduced through the courtesy of BLAGO fund, [www.srpskoblag.org](http://www.srpskoblag.org))

the portraits of Constantine and Irene on the south wall. According to Catherine's *vita* she was successful in convincing the Alexandrian sages about the righteousness of Christianity, for which she was martyred by order of the emperor Maxentius. The juxtaposition of Catherine's image and the inscription indicates the saint's learnedness and rhetorical skill, her most distinct characteristics.<sup>70</sup> The motif of unlikely characters—a

woman and a child—outsmarting a group of learned men links Catherine's image with that of the teaching Christ. This motif also bridges the Gospel scene and the royal portraits. It could be argued that the placement of Catherine's portrait and the peculiar iconography of the teaching scene referred to the difficulties that the controversial figure of Constantine Tich had to overcome in order to ascend the Bulgarian throne. Historians of the period have suggested that while taking over the throne Constantine had to deal not only

70 H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott (Chicago and London, 1994), 380; Ševčenko, "Monastery of Mount Sinai," 125. For western medieval interpretations of Catherine's rhetorical skills, see, for example, A. Bernau, "A Christian *Corpus*: Virginité, Violence, and Knowledge in the Life of St Katherine of Alexandria," in *St Katherine of Alexandria: Texts and Contexts in Western Medieval Europe*, ed. J. Jenkins and K. J. Lewis (Turnhout, 2003), 109–30; E. Bievre, "The Maiden Disputes: Saint Catharine in Amsterdam," in *Raising the Eyebrow: John Onians and World Art Studies*, ed.

L. Golden (Oxford, 2001), 11–16. Catherine is represented arguing with the Alexandrian sages in the eleventh-century Theodore Psalter (London, British Library, Add. 19352, fol. 167r). For an image, see S. Der Nersessian, *L'illustration des psautiers grecs du Moyen-âge* (Paris, 1970), 2: fig. 268; for a discussion of the scene, see C. Walsh, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Early Medieval Europe* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2007), 32–34.

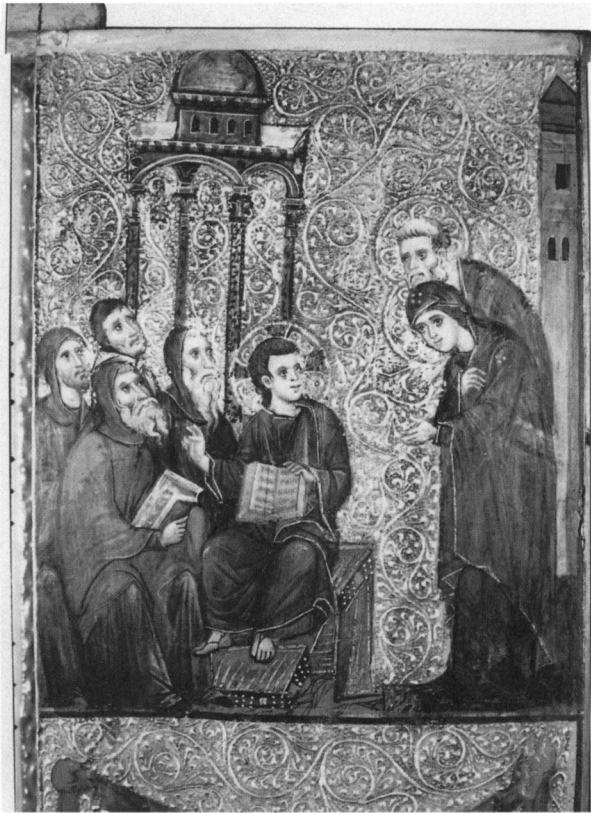


FIG. 16. Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai, “Acre” Triptych, detail of Twelve-Year Old Christ Teaching in the Temple (reproduced through the courtesy of the Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai)

with political but also with religious opposition.<sup>71</sup> If the model for the king was Christ, why would not the Pharisees represent his enemies?

### The Narratives of Saint Nicholas’s Life

The life of St. Nicholas was presented in the Boiana narthex in an extensive cycle of eighteen scenes, its length unprecedented in the thirteenth century. The space brims with Nicholas’s saintly manifestations and thus becomes a locus of the miraculous. Was Kaloian trying to capture the saint’s powers in order to reaffirm his own and Constantine’s positions as rightful lords? Was not this overwhelming saintly presence a sanction for,

71 Zhdrakov, “Za podpisite” (n. 1 above), 59.

if not even a proof of, the authority of the two laymen represented in the narthex? I will demonstrate here that, indeed, the painted narratives of Nicholas’s life were woven into the monumental ensemble of the narthex so as to corroborate Kaloian’s and Constantine’s claims of legitimacy.

The cycle occupies the vaulted ceiling, and relates successive stages in the saint’s life from his birth and deeds in the course of his lifetime to his death and posthumous miracles (figs. 2a, 2b). Its appearance in the church vestibule is consistent with its common placement in the narthexes of other contemporary monuments in Northern Greece and Serbia, and makes apparent the dedication of this part of the church to St. Nicholas.<sup>72</sup>

André Grabar, who was the first to study the Boiana frescoes in depth, has perceived the cycle of the life of St. Nicholas as arbitrary and chaotic,<sup>73</sup> while Nancy Ševčenko has seen in it a clear reflection of the newly emergent form of the narrative *vita* icon.<sup>74</sup> She aptly related the organization of some of the scenes in Boiana to those on a twelfth-century historiated icon on Mt. Sinai.<sup>75</sup> The comparison with *vita* icons should be extended even further, for, as on most of them, the narrative in Boiana is not strictly chronological: the saint here continuously metamorphoses from one stage of life to another—from a child into an adult, from a layman into a bishop, from a living into a dead person. At Boiana only the representations associated with the early life of St. Nicholas follow a strict temporal sequence, which was intended to be read from west to east as one moves inward and closer to the entrance into the naos—the birth is represented first, followed by the education of Nicholas, his ordination as a deacon, and then as a bishop (fig. 2a). The saint’s initiations bring him closer to the sacred and by following them the viewer approaches it himself.

While most of the life of Nicholas in Boiana does not demonstrate concerns with chronological order, closer examination reveals intentional placement of the scenes so as to interact both with each other and with the portraits below. Those scenes placed at the edge of

72 Ševčenko, *Life of Saint Nicholas*, 159–61.

73 Grabar, *Peinture religieuse* (n. 32 above), 128.

74 N. Ševčenko, “Cycles of the Life of St. Nicholas in Byzantine Art” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1973), 438–39.

75 Ibid., 438.

the cycle and closer to the walls are grouped according to the rhetorical principle of *synkrisis*, articulating variations in the image of the saint as a charitable figure, a helper at sea, and a defender of the Orthodox faith (figs. 2a, 2b). Thus St. Nicholas assisting a father with the dowry of his three daughters is related to its counterpart across the narthex, St. Nicholas buying a carpet from a poor man; to the north, the saving of Demetrios from drowning is associated with the sea miracle to the south; the cutting of the cypress tree inhabited by a demon and the taking down of the statue of Artemis form a pair concerned with exorcism and the defeat of demonic powers; and the last two scenes in the western corners of the vault—St. Nicholas's funeral and the saving of the three men from execution—are both related to death and dying. The pair of scenes on the lunette of the west door—the bringing of the boy Basil to his parents and the three generals offering thanks to St. Nicholas—reiterate the message of piety and thanksgiving recorded in the donor inscription on the north wall.

The cycle of the three generals, found in the southern half, is one of the most popular and most frequently represented in Byzantine art.<sup>76</sup> It occupies a special place at Boiana and is extensively illustrated in six separate scenes. As mentioned above, the impending execution of the innocent men that initiates the story is seen in the southwestern corner of the cycle. The remaining images are on the vault and on the west lunette. They relate the main events of the written *vita*, beginning with an image of the generals in prison and concluding with their gratitude for their release. Chronology, however, is not of concern here, and meaning is generated through the association of certain scenes with neighboring images. Thus, the appearance of St. Nicholas to the emperor Constantine was no doubt purposefully aligned with the portrait of the homonymous Bulgarian king Constantine Tich (figs. 2b, 17), perhaps indicating that the former was the latter's patron saint.<sup>77</sup> As Biserka Penkova has pointed out, the privileged placement of SS. Constantine and Helena in close proximity to the altar of the Boiana church could be taken as evidence that Constantine Tich sought a special connection with the first Christian emperor.<sup>78</sup> In Boiana the

two Constantines are dressed in identical *loroi* of a rare and antiquated type not worn by Byzantine emperors since the eleventh century, which would have contributed to the perception of the two figures as royal twins.<sup>79</sup> However, the prominence assigned to St. Constantine in Boiana does not reflect only Constantine Tich's personal devotions. In Bulgaria the interest in the first Christian emperor as an ideal ruler was especially heightened in the thirteenth century among the kings of the Asen dynasty.<sup>80</sup> What better way for Constantine Tich to align himself with the severed Bulgarian royal line than to display a forged relationship with the legendary founder of Constantinople?

The motif of financial assistance and charity is emphasized in the scenes placed at the two eastern corners of the vault immediately over the portraits of the donors: in the image above Kaloian and Desislava, St. Nicholas is giving money to a father to marry off his daughters, and in the scene above Constantine and Irene, St. Nicholas is buying a carpet from an impoverished man (figs. 18, 19). The image of the saint giving money is inspired by an episode in Nicholas's biography when he appeared to a poor man to help him procure a dowry for his daughters so as to prevent them from becoming prostitutes.<sup>81</sup> In Boiana the father is represented reclining on a bed, while St. Nicholas from behind a low wall extends his hand with a bulging purse toward the sleeping figure. This iconographic approach, stressing the charitable action of the saint, was surely utilized to parallel

Grabar, *Boianskata tsurkva* (n. 1 above), 66, fig. XXXV.

79 M. Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography, 11th to 15th Centuries* (Leiden and Boston, 2002), 18–22, esp. 20. The painters in Boiana were familiar with the more current version of the simplified *loros* as seen in the portraits of Old Testament kings in the scene of the Anastasis (fig. 13). The pattern on Desislava's dress with medallion-enclosed lion pairs also seems to have been old-fashioned. Cf. A. Muthesius, "Textiles and Dress in Byzantium," in *Material Culture and Well-Being in Byzantium (400–1453)*, ed. M. Grünbart et al. (Vienna, 2007), 166.

80 V. Tupkova-Zaimova and A. Miltenova, *Istoriko-apokaliptichna knizhnina vuv Vizantiia i v srednovekovna Bulgariia* (Sofia, 1996), 71. I thank Dr. Angel Nikolov for this reference. For the continuous importance of Constantine the Great in fourteenth-century Bulgarian royal ideology, see A. E. Tachiaos, "Le culte de saint Constantin en Bulgarie au XIVe siècle," in *Srednovekovna khristianska Evropa: Iztok i Zapad; Tsennosti, traditsii, obshtuvane*, ed. V. Giuzelev and A. Miltenova (Sofia, 2002), 79–84.

81 Ševčenko, *Life of Saint Nicholas*, 86–90.

76 Ševčenko, *Life of Saint Nicholas*, 104–8.

77 Penkova, "Chudoto na Sv. Nikolai" (n. 1 above), 9.

78 Ibid.; eadem, "Les saints apôtres Constant[n] [sic] et Hélène dans les fresques de l'église de Boiana," *Niš i Vizantijska* 8 (2009): 273–81;





FIG. 17. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, narthex, vault, Life of St. Nicholas, Nicholas Appearing to Constantine (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

the generosity of the *ktetor* himself; immediately below this episode Kaloian offers the model of the refurbished church to the patron St. Nicholas (figs. 2a, 6). By inserting himself within a timeless framework of gift-giving initiated by Mary's parents in the Presentation and continued by Nicholas in the two scenes on the easternmost edges of the cycle, Kaloian was demonstrating his newly found superiority within the social hierarchy as well as his suitability to be a civic leader.<sup>82</sup> Kaloian's gift-giving did not have only a political dimension; it was also spiritual, as it facilitated a special bond with St. Nicholas and his redemptive powers, assuring a special place for the donor in a paradisiacal afterlife.<sup>83</sup>

82 Cf. M. Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London, New York, 1990), 90.

83 Cf. E. Magnani S.-Christen, "Transforming Things and

The idea of charity continues in the opposite side of Nicholas's cycle in the image of the miracle with the carpet. It is strategically placed exactly above the portraits of the Bulgarian king Constantine and his wife Irene, and is thus meaningfully associated with them (figs. 2b, 19). Most scholars believe that the story derives from a now-lost Greek version of Nicholas's life, preserved only in Slavic sources.<sup>84</sup> Another scenario is also possible: the story is not Greek but Slavic, and originated some time before the beginning of the thirteenth

Persons: The Gift *pro anima* in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. G. Algazi et al. (Gottingen, 2003), 269–84.

84 Grabar, *Peinture religieuse* (n. 32 above), 131–37; Mavrodinov, *L'église de Boïana* (n. 1 above), 29; Ševčenko, "Cycles of the Life of St. Nicholas" (n. 74 above), 434.





FIG. 18. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, narthex, vault, Life of St. Nicholas, Nicholas Giving Money to a Poor Father (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

century, when it is attested in Russian manuscripts.<sup>85</sup> This was also when the Novgorod archbishop and pilgrim Antony reported seeing the carpet in the chapel of St. Nicholas in the Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia.<sup>86</sup>

85 E. I. Demina, "Klassifikatsiia bolgarskikh damaskinov po redaktsiiam 'Chudo o kovre,'" *Akademiia Nauk SSSR: Uchënye zapiski instituta slavianovedeniia* 23 (1962): 212–46; I. I. Makaveeva, "Rannie slavianskie chudesa sviatitelia Nikolaia Mirlikiiskogo," in *Pravilo very i obraz krotosti...Obraz sv. Nikolaia, arkhiepiskopa Mirlikiiskogo v vizantiiskoi i slavianskoi agiografii, gimnografii i ikonografii*, ed. A. V. Bugaevskii (Moscow, 2004), 169, 177–78; N. V. Pak and I. D. Soloviova, "Zhitie sviatogo Nikolaia Chudotvortsia i ego otrazhenie v drevnerusskoi pis'mennosti i ikonopisi XI–XVII vekov," in *Sviatoi Nikolai Mirlikiiskii v proizvedeniiakh XII–XIX stoletii iz sobraniia Russkogo muzeia* (St. Petersburg, 2006), 20.

86 H. M. Loparev, "Kniga Palomnik: Ckazanie mest' sviatykh vo Tsarigrade Antonia Arkhiepiskopa Novgorodskogo v 1200 gody," *PPSb* 17 (1899): 5. Not one of the multiple descriptions of

Constantinople mentions the relic of the carpet, and one might ask if Antony was not preconditioned to "seeing" it because he already knew about it. Could it be, as Grabar (*Peinture religieuse*, 167) proposed some time ago, that Antony identified a *podea*, a cloth hanging from an icon, as the carpet of Nicholas's miracle? In his travelogue he wrote: "The carpet of St. Nicholas is suspended" (ковёр святого Николы висит), and this may mean that he mistook a textile hung from the lower portion of an icon, perhaps of Nicholas himself, for the carpet of the saint's miracle. Naturally this might have been also a tapestry of some sort that adorned the chapel. If Antony made this mistake, is it possible that the Boiana painter represented a precious textile, a silk perhaps, and not really a carpet? It is very likely that in Boiana the placement of the scene of Nicholas appearing to the emperor Constantine above the miracle with the carpet was meant to draw additional attention to the Constantinopolitan background of the two events. Although the backdrop of the Byzantine capital would have added to the authenticity of the story, it cannot be taken as proof that it originated in a Greek context. Bissierka Penkova ("Chudoto na Sv. Nikolai" [n. 1 above], 9), for example, has recently suggested that the episode is present in Boiana because of the intensified contacts of Bulgarian royalty with Russia, where the miracle is first attested.





FIG. 19. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, narthex, vault, Life of St. Nicholas, Miracle with the Carpet (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

The iconography of the miracle at Boiana emphasizes the exchange between Nicholas and the poor man (fig. 19).<sup>87</sup> It pictures St. Nicholas on the left and the poor man on the right meeting before some sort of generic-looking architecture. The focal point of the image is, however, the carpet—a large, sumptuously decorated dark red cloth adorned with pairs of eagles and lions enclosed in medallions (fig. 20). In its interstices are seen small crosses and white dots which are echoed immediately below in the pearl-studded *loros* of the Bulgarian king and the decoration of the gown of his queen.

87 The miracle could be visualized with two separate scenes as seen on Russian *vita* icons of St. Nicholas. See, for example, *Sviatoy Nikolai Mirlikiiskii* (n. 85 above), 54–57, 70–74.

The carpet displayed between St. Nicholas and the poor man demonstrates clear knowledge on the part of the artists of Byzantine-produced textiles.<sup>88</sup> Eagles and lions appear most frequently on Byzantine silks, an expensive medium associated with imperial and high aristocratic patronage.<sup>89</sup> As on the Boiana textile, animals on existing silks are usually symmetrically paired. The medallion style used to enclose them in the Boiana carpet is a distinctly Byzantine device which, although

88 For the Byzantine identity of the carpet in Boiana, see Akrabova-Zhandova, *Boianskata tsurkva* (n. 1 above), 43–44; Grabar, *Peinture religieuse*, 167 and n. 3; Moran, “Byzantine Carpet Ideology” (n. 1 above), 13–15; Penkova, “Chudoto na Sv. Nikolai” (n. 1 above), 8.

89 A. Muthesius, *Byzantine Silk Weaving, AD 400 to AD 1200* (Vienna, 1997), 44–57. See also the article by C. Hilsdale in this volume.





FIG. 20. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, narthex, vault, Life of St. Nicholas, Miracle with the Carpet, detail showing carpet (photo: V. Tzvetkov)

rarely encountered from the eleventh century onward, must have signaled the Greek identity of the cloth.<sup>90</sup> In no other later representation of the miracle do we see any interest in visualizing the sumptuous appearance of the carpet; this should be taken as an indication that at Boiana it was meant to function not only as a narrative device but also as a visual cue tying the scene to the royal portraits below and to the image of Christ Chalkites on the neighboring pier. Within the context of the Boiana narthex program the prominently displayed textile with its imperial connotations participates in a network of authentications—of the miracle

90 J. Trilling, *The Medallion Style: A Study in the Origins of Byzantine Taste* (New York and London, 1985).

as one occurring in Constantinople and of Constantine Tich as the legitimate king.

The royal significance of the color and of the animals in the Boiana carpet is unmistakable, given their physical proximity to the images of the ruling couple.<sup>91</sup> Precious textiles were not only worn by the king, they could also frame the spaces within which he dwelled or moved. Red or purple textiles, which could be embroidered or additionally adorned with zoomorphic motifs, were displayed during certain ceremonial occasions to provide an impressive backdrop for the imperial presence.<sup>92</sup>

The Boiana carpet, however, was meant to be associated not only with the images of the Bulgarian royal family, but also with the fresco icon of Christ Chalkites (figs. 2b, 4). In the late eleventh century the Chalkites icon in Constantinople began performing miracles by means of a veil or a *podea* attached to it. Thus two members of the Komnenian ruling family were healed through a piece of cloth hanging from the lower portion of the panel.<sup>93</sup> In gratitude for the miracle Maria Doukaina, the wife of the cured *protostrator* Alexios, offered the icon a gold-embroidered purple veil, in a sense perpetuating the relationship between the image and precious textiles.<sup>94</sup> In Boiana the close proximity of St. Nicholas's miracle with the carpet to the image of Christ Chalkites may have been intended to evoke the healing properties of the Constantinopolitan original. The beautiful dark red

91 For the appearance of griffins on the clothing of the emperor Manuel I Komnenos, see L. Jones and H. Maguire, "A Description of the Jousts of Manuel I Komnenos," *BMGS* 26 (2002): 104–48; for references to eagles worn by the emperor, see A. Cutler, "Imagination and Documentation: Eagle Silks in Byzantium, the Latin West and 'Abbāsid Baghdad,'" *ByzF* 96 (2003): 68–69; H. Maguire, "The Heavenly Court," in *Byzantine Court Culture* (n. 26 above), 253. Eagles in medallions also adorn the garment of St. Nicholas on a thirteenth-century vita icon from Pisa. See M. Bacci, ed., *San Nicola: Splendori d'arte d'Oriente e d'Occidente* (Milan, 2006), 281, 293–94.

92 Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images* (n. 79 above), 179–80, 182–83; W. Woodfin, "Clothing the Icon: The *Podea* and Analogous Liturgical Textiles" (paper presented at the twenty-seventh Byzantine Studies Conference, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, 2001; *BSCAbstr* 27 [2001]: 43), 8. I thank Dr. Woodfin for sharing the text of his unpublished paper with me.

93 Mango, *Brazen House* (n. 4 above), 132–33; V. Nunn, "The Encheirion as Adjunct to the Icon in the Middle Byzantine Period," *BMGS* 10 (1986): 85.

94 Mango, *Brazen House*, 133; Nunn, "Encheirion as Adjunct," 94–95.

textile displayed between St. Nicholas and the poor man may thus be an indirect reference to the icon's miraculous *podea*, and even to the veils gifted to it in gratitude.

The luxurious figural cloth at Boiana should be considered part of the visual nexus tying the images of the royal couple with that of Christ Chalkites, and indicating the simultaneous use of precious textiles in the imperial as well as in the religious sphere.<sup>95</sup> It further highlighted and even strengthened the special connection between Tsar Constantine and Christ and provided yet another visual cue that confirmed to the viewer the legitimacy of the Bulgarian king and through it that of the donor Kaloian.

### Formulated Identities: The Boiana Church between East and West

A close analysis of the monumental ensemble of the Boiana narthex not only shows that it redefined the identities of the donors and the royal couple and prepared viewers to participate in the eucharistic mysteries. It also shines new light on the visual quotations and borrowed iconographies within the church, and helps one to reevaluate the ensemble's place in the artistic production of the thirteenth-century Mediterranean world. It is appropriate to initiate this discussion of the transformational nature of the fresco program by contextualizing the so-called Constantinopolitan models and identifying their role in transforming the image of the Bulgarian king Constantine. I contend that it is hardly coincidental that numerous direct and indirect references to the Byzantine capital—the image of Christ Chalkites, the appearance of St. Nicholas to Constantine the Great, and the miracle with the carpet—are clustered in immediate proximity to the portraits of the royal couple. I do not imply that Constantine was in any way involved in designing the program of the Boiana church; it was all Kaloian's doing. Having found himself propelled to the highest rank of *sebastokrator* he needed to fashion an effective visual statement that represented Constantine Tich as legitimately empowered to bestow such a high courtly rank on a political neophyte. Otherwise Kaloian's social superiority could be easily challenged or even taken away.

95 Woodfin, "Clothing the Icon," 9.

Were the Boiana artists truly innovative in weaving Constantinopolitan references into the monumental ensemble of the church? Or were they using familiar visual idioms, already appropriated by the kings of the Asen dynasty with whom Kaloian and especially Constantine Tich desperately sought close associations? According to Ivan Bozhilov, Ivan II Asen, the king with whom Constantine Tich was more or less directly connected through his marriage to Irene, transferred the imperial authority from Byzantium to the kingdom of the Bulgarians.<sup>96</sup> This *translatio imperii* was achieved through successful military campaigns and diplomatic missions, and was visibly expressed in the Bulgarian royal titlature and iconography, which took on distinctly Byzantine flavor.<sup>97</sup> In these terms the references to Constantinople in the Boiana monumental program legitimized the new rule of Constantine Tich and aided his refashioning from usurper into a successor worthy of the dynastic line of Asen. His royal identity was made apparent not only through his imperial dress but also through the placement of his portrait on the eastern end of the south wall to invoke the location of the imperial *metatorion* in the Constantinopolitan Hagia Sophia. It was further strengthened through the positioning of his image in close proximity to one of the quintessential imperial icons of Christ, as well as through its strategic association with two episodes from the life of St. Nicholas—the miracle with the carpet and his appearance to the emperor Constantine—both of which occurred in the Byzantine capital.

While some of the visual models in Boiana were meant to supplement the image of Constantine Tich as a legitimate king of Bulgaria, others functioned to display the relationship of the *ktetor* Kaloian with the royal house of Serbia, enunciated in the donor inscription on the north wall. Bisserka Penkova has already indicated the possibility that the fresco icon of the Virgin on the lunette over the door (fig. 3) may refer to the Constantinopolitan icon of the Virgin Evergetis and most importantly to the fact that the first Serbian king Stefan Nemanja, Kaloian's alleged grandfather, was especially devoted to it.<sup>98</sup> The presence of the portrait of

96 I. Bozhilov, *Sedem etiuda po srednovekovna istoriia* (Sofia, 1995), 189–91.

97 G. Bakalov, *Srednovekovniiat bulgarski vladetel (Titulatura i insignii)* (Sofia, 1985, rept. 1995), 212–13.

98 Penkova, "Bogoroditsa s Mladenetsa" (n. 1 above), 671–72.





FIG. 21. Church of SS Nicholas and Panteleemon, naos, bema, south wall, St. Stephen (photo: A. Kirin)

the Jerusalemite Saint Sabas in the Boiana narthex has similarly been taken to indicate the special relationship between the donor and Serbia.<sup>99</sup> Even though this is not a representation of the first Serbian archbishop but of his patron saint,<sup>100</sup> and although Sabas's portrait is standard in the cluster of depictions of sainted monks, for the medieval mind, prone to symbolic assimilations, the monk would have inevitably invoked the memory of the homonymous archbishop. A yet unnoted feature of Boiana's monumental program, which should be considered as another reference to the Serbian royal house, is the extraordinary prominence assigned to St. Stephen on the south wall of the altar apse (fig. 21). His full-

length portrait is juxtaposed with two bust images of deacons on the north wall, which signal the identity of the saint as the prototypical deacon. Yet the saint's towering figure is represented in plain antique garb, and not in a deacon's attire; moreover he holds a scroll and not a censer, as one might expect. As a namesake and patron saint of the Nemanjid dynasty, Stephen was given importance as a protector of the state and royal successions, and it is exactly in the guise of an apostle and not a deacon that he was painted most frequently in medieval Serbia.<sup>101</sup>

Along the same lines, I would like to suggest that the long narrative from the Life of St. Nicholas not only indicates the church's dedication to him but also signals the prominence of the saint's cult in the Byzantine commonwealth, and more specifically in Serbia, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>102</sup> It has long been established that Nicholas was one of the most honored saints in medieval Serbia.<sup>103</sup> Very likely the transfer of his relics from Myra to Bari contributed to his popularity among the Serbs because of their physical proximity to the shrine on the western shore of the Adriatic, and the importance of the Dalmatian coast as a stopping point in the Orthodox pilgrim traffic to Nicholas's remains.<sup>104</sup> There is also great probability that Helena, the Catholic-born queen of Serbia and wife of Stefan Uroš I (1243–1276), was instrumental in the further

101 D. Vojvodović, "Prilog poznavanju ikonografije i kulta Sv. Stefana u Vizantiji i Srbiji," in *Zidno slikarstvo manastira Dečana*, ed. V. Djurić (Belgrade, 1995), 537–65.

102 Ševčenko, *Life of St. Nicholas*, 22–23. Cf. P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos 1143–1180* (Cambridge, 1993, repr. 1997), 476; C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood, NJ, 1986, repr. Toronto, 1997), 226.

103 I. Djordjević, *Zidno slikarstvo srpske vlastele u doba Nemanjića* (Belgrade, 1994), 90–91; M. Purković, "Svetiteljski kultovi u staroj Srpskoj državi prema hramovnom posvećivanju," *Bogoslovle* 14 (1939): 161–62, 166–68; Todić, *Srpsko slikarstvo*, 183.

104 G. Cioffari, "The Tzars of Serbia and the Basilica of St. Nicholas of Bari," *Nicolaus: Rivista di teologia ecumenico-patristica* 9 (1981): 152–54; idem, *Gli zar di Serbia, la Puglia e S. Nicola: Una storia di santità e di violenza* (Naples, 1989), 20–24; B. Miljković, "Nemanji i sveti Nikola u Bariju," *ZRVI* 47 (2007): 275–94. Apparently the transfer of Nicholas's relics to Bari led to the popularity of the saint in Russia and to establishing an additional feast in honor of the translation of his relics. See, for example, N. V. Pivovarova, "Ikonografija sviatogo Nikolaia Chudotvortsa i ee otrazhenie v drevnerusskoi khudozhestvennoi traditsii," in *Sviatoi Nikolai Mirlikitskii* (n. 85 above), 22.

99 Brisby, "Historiography" (n. 1 above), 30.

100 B. Todić, *Srpsko slikarstvo u doba kralja Milutina* (Belgrade, 1998), 66.



dissemination of Nicholas's cult and the rising interest of the Serbian royal family in his shrine at Bari.<sup>105</sup> The importance of St. Nicholas among the members of the Serbian court with whom Kaloian claimed blood ties might account for the prominence assigned to his *vita* in Boiana.

The infiltration of western iconographic elements at Boiana, especially in the representations of Nicholas's life, such as the two badges on the ship in the scene of the sea miracle or the unusual pointed hat of the boy Basil (fig. 12),<sup>106</sup> may have been facilitated by intensified contacts with pilgrims to Nicholas's shrine in Bari, which had risen to considerable prominence by the thirteenth century, when the church was rebuilt and redecorated.<sup>107</sup> It also could be tied to the presence of Crusaders in the Balkans, as well as to the geopolitical position of medieval Sofia on one of the main east-west thoroughfares—the Via Militaris, known also as the “Crusader Road”—and the city's intense trade connections with the West.<sup>108</sup> It might be, of course, that the donor Kaloian commissioned painters from his homeland in the western parts of Bulgaria who would have had easier access to and understanding of western iconographies.<sup>109</sup>

Incorporated within the saint's pictorial biography, western elements add a sense of immediacy and realism, but they appear to be of secondary importance—they enliven the image and strike the imagination, but do not generate meaning. This heightened sensitivity to western, and more specifically Crusader,

visual sources was transformed into a meaningful borrowing only in the representation of the twelve-year-old Christ teaching in the Temple (fig. 10). The feeling of discord conveyed in the iconography of the episode effectively mirrored the conflict between Constantine Tich and his aristocratic opponents. The incorporation of western iconographies in the narrative scenes at Boiana makes it apparent that the painters who worked here participated in the larger exchange of visual modes and in the creation of an artistic *koine* in the thirteenth-century Mediterranean. Indeed, Boiana is yet to be assigned a rightful place within this wider context of cross-cultural interactions.

Carefully formulated and strategically positioned, the narrative scenes in the narthex of the Boiana church transform an unknown nobleman into a legitimate king, an aristocrat into a powerful lord, and the faithful entering the church into worthy participants in the mysteries unveiled in the naos. The visual messages are emphatically redundant in order to reaffirm continuously the identity of the painted laymen and of the actual participants in the liturgy as rightful recipients of the Eucharist—God's ultimate gift. The themes of the donors' charity and of the king's legitimacy are visually restated in as many ways as possible—thus Kaloian and Desislava are incorporated in a timeless network of gift-giving through their conspicuous association with the Presentation of the Virgin and the image of Nicholas giving money to an impoverished father, while Constantine Tich and Irene are pictured as the rightful heirs to a powerful kingdom through association with venerable symbols of authority such as the imperial icon of Christ Chalkites, the regal figure of Catherine of Alexandria, and the sumptuous textile displayed in Nicholas's miracle with the carpet. While the narratives at Boiana were articulating the identities of the donors and their royal benefactors, they were also challenging the viewers to participate in an ongoing process of reevaluating their rightful place within the history of the sacred past and the circumstances of the immediate present.

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105 Cioffari, *Gli zar di Serbia*, 25–26; Miljković, “Nemaniji i sveti Nikola,” 277–79.

106 Ševčenko, *Life of St. Nicholas*, 145.

107 For possible connections of the Nicholas cycle in Boiana with Bari, see Bozhilov, “Portretite” (n. 18 above), 8.

108 D. Angelov, “Sofia prez Vtoroto Bulgarsko Tsarstvo (1185–1396),” in *Sofia prez vekovete*, vol. 1, *Drevnost, srednovekovie, vuzrazhdane*, ed. P. Dinekov et al. (Sofia, 1989), 62; E. Koytcheva, “Logistical Problems for the Movement of the Early Crusades through the Balkans: Transport and Road Systems,” in *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21–26 August 2006*, vol. 2, *Abstracts of Panel Papers*, ed. J. Gilliland et al. (Aldershot and Burlington, 2006), 54; P. Mutafchiev, *Kniga za bulgarite* (Sofia, 1987), 136–37.

109 Zhdrakov, “Za podpisite” (n. 1 above); K. Hadzhiev, “Novi epigraphski pametnitsi ot Boianskata tsurkva,” *Problemi na izkustvoto* 41 (2008): 15.